

Manx Notes 46 (2005)

“A THOROUGHLY UNSATISFACTORY,
MERETRICIOUS PUBLICATION”

THE MANX SUN REVIEW OF MANX NATIONAL SONGS (1896)

MANX SONGS WITH ENGLISH WORDS, selected from the M.S. collection of the DEEMSTER GILL, DR. J. CLAGUE, and W.H. GILL, and arranged by W.H. GILL, (London: Boosey and Co., 1896.)

MANX BALLADS AND MUSIC, Edited by A.W. MOORE, M.A., with a Preface by the Rev T.E. BROWN, M.A. (Douglas: G. and B. Johnson, 1896.)

Few greater pleasures are the lot of the reviewer than the reviewing of a really good work—a book interesting in its subject and workmanlike in its style. We have no hesitation whatever in declaring that both these requirements are abundantly fulfilled in one of the two volumes before us. That such is not the case in both instances is entirely due to the sadly mistaken views on “collecting” held by the compilers, who are not, unfortunately, content with giving to the world the fruits, pure and simple, of their industry, gleaned no doubt with painstaking intelligence. With long experience we can safely add we have never previously met with a more painful instance of the art of the “improver,” than is displayed in the first of these two books, the very title of which is utterly misleading. Sad to relate, nothing is sacred to the modern reformer. He will as readily re-trim and “adapt” an old ballad as he will pull down, in order to “renovate” the ancient parish steeple. It is a pitiful fact that the hand of Iconoclast is ever hovering near, and like a destroying angel, withers all he touches. A more forcible example of this has probably never been afforded than in the first of these two books, edited by the Messrs Gill, from whom Manx people have a right to expect better things. In the case of both books the editors set out with an exactly similar object, namely to collect the old Folk-songs of their fathers. They do this with the avowed object of gathering these fragments from a dying past and handing them on to future generations; truly a laudable object and all honour to those who will honestly and faithfully do such work. There is no higher business for man than to make his fellow men happy and the happiness and joy of peoples are to be found best expressed in their national ballads; the joys and sorrows, the loves and games, the defeats and triumphs, these are the real life of every nation and by no people on earth are these characteristics exhibited in stronger degree than by the sons and daughters of Ellan Vannin. In the case of the Messrs Gill they have utterly and ignominiously failed to attend to the elementary rules which should be observed by collectors and this failure compels us, with pain, to condemn their book as a thoroughly unsatisfactory, meretricious publication and an unnecessary interference

with a subject we wish the authors had not touched, or touched not with sacrilegious hands.

That this criticism is neither unfair nor unwarranted the most cursory examination of Messrs Gill's book will prove to demonstration. In the preface the book is stated to be "the first practical outcome" of a project "to collect and preserve from oblivion [...] the national music of the Isle of Man." Let us for a moment examine this very extraordinary "first practical outcome." The compilers inform us, and we know the statement to be substantially true, that a few old people retain the words and tunes of an ancient Manx music but that they are somewhat reluctant to sing the songs of their forefathers lest they should be received by the rising generation with a lack of proper reverence. We devoutly wish the "old people" had effectually shown this reluctance when visited by the Messrs Gill for they truly inform us further as the results of their collection that "the songs in this volume are given as showing one form into which the originals maybe developed." It is further stated again that for various reasons the Manx words of the songs are not given, one of these reasons being that "many are unfit for publication." A tolerably extensive knowledge of the subject compels us to revolt against this statement for with the exception of some half-dozen or so ribald rhymes, which under no circumstances could be called "Manx Songs" there is not a word of truth in it. "For various reasons" (we are again quoting from the book) "the English words are in no sense translations [...] have no connection with the original themes." Verily a strange collection of "Manx Songs." Instead of giving a translation of the well-known words to the air "Ny Kirree fo Niaghthey" a new set, not nearly so pretty as the translation of the original afforded, is supplied, and is stated to be written by W.H. Gill, who has also written words "suggested" by the original Manx ballad of "Mylecharaine," a name which is not even correctly spelled. We are not told whether the originals are "unfit for publication" as so many others are said to be. We have many instances in the book of this busy meddling and peddling "improving" spirit. Thus we have no less than nine or ten of the "songs" in this book of "Manx National Songs" written by Mr Gill, and they can all, without injustice, be safely classed as of the most mediocre, wishy-washy description. We have not the smallest objection to Mr Gill or anyone else writing songs—if they are songs—but we have a very decided objection to parting with money for a book of "Manx Songs" which are neither Manx, National, nor yet songs. Again, song writers of fame, some of whom never saw the Isle of Man, are dragged in to do duty in this book, such for instance as James Hogg, the "Ettrick Shepherd[.]" Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, Tom Hood, even the venerable and worthy Dr Watts of "busy bee" fame. Verily the Messrs Gill and Clague are anxious to stand in great company. The result of this mixture of things Manx and things not Manx that we have the finest hodgepodge imaginable, and this combined, with the amount of stirring the mixture has had would do credit to a concocter of Christmas pudding. Scotch ballads, such as "When Maggy gangs awa," and English religious poetry, as

“Hush! my dear, lie still and slumber,” are jumbled side by side with newly manufactured verses for “Mylecharaine” and “Illiam Dhone,” and to crown their egotism the compilers have labelled the book, in all the glory of gold letters, “Manx National Songs.” Room is found for songs of other nations, but a truly Manx piece such as “Hop-tu-naa” is denied admission altogether. Surely the propriety of things was never more grossly outraged. Messrs Gill and Clague may, without objection, collect and publish their own effusions, weak and ineffective as in this book they show themselves, but in dealing with the heritage of ballads, which have come down to our age, we have a right to protest against mutilation and against inclusion of new “songs” with what is old and genuine.

The compilers have treated the music not less unmercifully than the words. An examination of many of the scores will convince any Manx singer or instrumentalist that these are not the tunes he has known and loved. For proof of this let any reader try the well known air of “Mylecharaine” or “Ny Kirree fo Niaghtey.” The collections in the volumes of the “Manx Society” and the “Mona Melodist” are known to be incorrect, but it is evident in the case of those volumes that the editors of the music did their best, however mistakenly, in their day and generation. They at any rate did not wilfully alter by endeavouring to “improve.” Except in one or two instances, and with these exceptions the renderings as there given are infinitely more true than is the case with the book under notice. According to Messrs Gill they have succeeded in gathering no fewer than two hundred and sixty local melodies, a sufficiently alarming statement to any faithful student of the subject. But we have no hesitation in declaring our belief that the greater portion of them would be found to have no possible connection with the Isle of Man. We cannot but think Mr Moore comes nearer the truth when he says “Careful inquiries have been made in every parish in the island with reference to those acquainted with old tunes” and yet the result of those inquiries is that he can publish only some forty-five tunes. If the number of known carol airs, etc., be added to these it will at once be found Messrs Gill’s statement of “two hundred and sixty local melodies” is an obvious exaggeration. Fortunately their book contains only some fifty airs, and as many of these have been so “transposed” and “improved” and “adapted” we are thankful there are no more of them.

We have no desire to write a single harsh word respecting the work of any one anxious to preserve memorials of the old Manx life, but we must seem express our regret that the Messrs Gill and Clague have taken a business for which they appear to be no way qualified. They promise a “largely extended selection of the melodies for the pianoforte,” but unless the work is more carefully done, and with an absence of the “restoring and improving” spirit, we would be glad if it could be transferred to more competent hands to perform. Such books as the one before us may serve, in the absence of better, to pass an hour in English drawing-rooms, where Manx songs are

not known, but let the aim of the compilers of such be clearly stated so that Manx people may assiduously avoid books they do not want.

In the second of the two books named at the head of our list we have a work of a very different character. The fruit of Mr Moore's labour is worthy of all praise. This is a real Manx book—Manx in subject and in treatment, in illustration and in printing—it is a credit to all concerned in its production. By fidelity to the ancient Manx words of the ballads, by careful translation of these, and by the carefully transcribed music, the book is, and is likely to remain, the most generally interesting book that has been published concerning the island. Every person who is at all interested in the island or in music should hasten to secure a copy or this valuable work, and we can promise pleasure of a very high order will be derived from the perusal of it. We believe Mr Moore has gathered up for the pleasure and profit of generations of Manxmen yet unborn all that is now ever likely to be gleaned of the ballads, and their music, of the Isle of Man. We confess to a feeling no less of surprise than of pleasure in handling the book. By great industry the collection has been so carefully made that probably nothing in the nature of a song or ballad has escaped notice, and, as a consequence, we have here no less than seventy four distinctly Manx pieces. These are classed in various sections as mythical, semi-historical and historical, children's songs, customs and superstitions, love songs, patriotic ballads, nautical ballads, and an unclassifiable miscellaneous. Under each of these headings we have, with the utmost accuracy so far attainable, the original Manx of each ballad and on the opposite page a literal translation without any attempt at English rhyme or metre. Had this been done the effect would have been to spoil the primitive simplicity of the songs. It could not, while retaining the full sense of the original, be made into good English metre, and it would certainly ruin the telling effect of the original Manx. It is much to be thankful for that while Mr Moore has removed, and rightly so, obvious corruptions, and has restored the original completeness he is not a "restorer" anxious to work in something of his own creation: something which never before belonged to the ballads.

With the exception of a few written by jolly Bishop Rutter, who, fittingly, lived in the early days of the Merry Monarch, Charles II, the words of most of these songs have come down to us only from the latter portion of the eighteenth century. We have little doubt that the horribly severe Church discipline of Bishops Barrow, Wilson, and Hildesley allowed by the Methodist revival, covering altogether a period of close upon two hundred years, did much, if not everything to stifle the naturally lively sentiment and tendency to occasional innocent enjoyment found in all Celtic people. No doubt during this disciplinary period much of the early ballad poetry died from pure neglect, combined with clerical intolerance; and we cannot doubt that by these occurrences, together with the almost total lack of education among the people, the store of musical enjoyment has been materially reduced.

As might be anticipated from a northern people, the songs are rugged in their simplicity. They have not the linked sweetness long drawn out such as is commonly found in the poetry of southern climes. They contain little of the passionate, but much of the homely. This is especially the case with the love songs where prudential considerations are often as well attended to as the billing and cooing side of an engagement; and, happily, this characteristic is not absent in these days. “Don’t marry for money, but go where money is.” Love ill supplies the place of bread and cheese. The section of love songs, however, contains much innocent humour, and is one of the most interesting portions of the book. As a sample of original and translation we select a verse or two from “Arrane Sooree,” a “courting song”:

Dooiney-Aeg:

Graa: my graih as my garjagh,
Nish lhiggys oo me stiagh,
Son dy voym’s agh un oor
Jeh dy heshaght villish noght.

Ven-Aeg:

Few royd voish yn unniag,
Fow royd ta mee dy graa,
Son cha jean-ym lhiggey stiagh oo,
Ta fys aym’s er ny shaare.

Dy bragh, ny dy bragh, guilley,
Cha bee aym’s ayd son ben,
Son cha vell mee goll dy phoosey,
My taitnys hene vys aym.

Dooiney-Aeg:

Hug ee eisht yn filleag arree,
As haink ee sheesh my whaail,
Lesh phaagaghyn cha graihagh,
Myr shoh renshin meeiteil.

Va ny creeaghyn ain cha kenjal,
Lesh yn gerjagh va ain cooidjagh;
Nagh geayll shin rieau lheid roie,
As scoan my nee shin arragh.

Translated as follows:

Young Man:

Saying: My love, my comfort,
Now do thou let me in;
Could I but have one hour of
Thy company to-night?

Young Woman:

Get away from the window,
Get away, I tell thee;
For I will not let you in,
I know better than that.

No, never; no, never, young man,
Will I be thy woman;
For I'm not going to marry,
My own pleasure I will have.

Young Man:

Then she throw her shawl o'er her,
And came down to meet me
With kisses, oh, how loving!
This way we did meet.

Our hearts were so mellow with
Our mutual pleasure;
You never heard such before,
And you scarce will again.

The historical songs include our old favourite "Thurot as Elliott" and the place of honour is occupied by "Fin as Oshin," that is "Fingal and Ossian," which carries us back almost to mythical times. It is curious that the only known written copy of this semi-historical piece should have lain buried amongst the treasures of the British Museum for more than one hundred years until discovered by the industry of Mr Moore. Had there in those early days been a Manx museum the M.S. might have found its rightful home and instead of lying so long forgotten it might have been possible to recover other portions of it. Now, alas, it is too late.

How delightful it is to turn over songs we were accustomed to sing in our youth and to find them in all their pristine beauty; songs we sang long years ago or which our mothers sang for us in rocking us to sleep. Here there are lots of them. The section of children's songs contains all the old favourites and is not the least

interesting part of the book. “Ushag veg Ruy,” “Juan y Jaggad Kear,” “Red Top-knots,” and others not less well known.

Among the songs of customs we have of course “Mylecharaine.” We are glad that at last an authoritative transcript of the original of this song is before us, together with a faithful translation. It may now be hoped that there is an end to the foolish spellings and very extraordinary translations we have seen for many years past issued, we regret to say, by Manx as well as English ignoramuses while some supposed rhyming translations have, at times, been simple outrages upon common sense. Now that the thing is, once and for all, done properly, we hope those having occasion to sing or quote the words will use the version given in this book. “Hunt the Wren” and “Hop-tu-naa” are equally good. Among the fishermen the nautical ballads will be especially appreciated, particularly those on the “Loss of the herring boats,” “Voyage of the Tiger,” and “Arrane y Skeddan.” It would occupy more space than is at our disposal to bring out each song specially worth notice because of the beauty and crispness of the translations or the explanatory notes freely inserted wherever necessary, but for a final example we must cite “Ny Kirree fo Niahtey.” We have carefully compared Mr Moore’s version with some half-dozen others now before us and in no instance is more careful treatment displayed than in this song. It has a beauty as a pastoral ballad which may be easily obscured by thoughtless transcribers but here the rendering is all that can be desired.

We have left ourselves little room to deal with the musical pages of the work, but there need be no hesitation in saying the airs are as we have heard them sung, and know them to be. With the exception of obvious corruptions and interpolations we can observe there are, happily, no “improvements,” and as we desire the old, and not something new, we are glad that beyond giving the old, old songs in all their purity of tone Mr Moore and his co-adjustors have attempted nothing more. We are pleased to observe this is definitely stated in the introductory preface. Mr Moore informs us he has allowed no preconceptions as to what might have been intended to enter into the question, but has simply set down the airs as heard from the lips of the singers and that a “prettified English presentation” has been sternly avoided. That this part of the work has been performed by competent hands will be apparent by the mention of the names of Miss Wood and Mr Colin Brown, a good authority on Celtic music.

The Introductory Prefaces by the Editor, and by the Rev. T.E. Brown, M.A., whom we are glad again to welcome afford pleasing reading, and a great deal of valuable and interesting information concerning the historical evolution of the songs and music, information hitherto obtainable only in scattered books, combined also with such original research.

We must not close without a reference to the manner in which the book is produced by the publishers, the quality of paper and beauty and clearness of print, Messrs Johnson deserve warm thanks. The printing is carefully worked and enhances

the credit the same firm earned for their share in the “Manx Note Book.” The binding is such that those desirous of doing may have the book re-bound to individual taste. As if to add a crowning glory to a book already handsome in appearance, we have a number of very beautiful illustrations by Mr J.M. Nicholson. So pretty are they indeed, and so carefully reproduced that we are filled with a desire for more, and would have been glad had there been double the number. Mr Nicholson has also designed the strikingly handsome title page. Where all is good it is difficult to choose but for ourselves we place among the best the sketches of Mount Karran in Sulby Glen, the entrance to Peel Castle, and that to “Ny Kirree fo Niaghtey.” All the tail-pieces, small though they be, are remarkably clear and effective. Upon examination of the book, we are confident readers will agree with us that to all concerned in its production, the very heartiest thanks are due. The book is reasonable in price, cheap even, and so we have the greater reason to commend it to all lovers of the old Manx Ballads and music and to hope it may have the circulation it deserves.

Source: Anon., “*Manx National Songs and Manx Ballads and Music*,” *Manx Sun* [16 January 1897], [?]. **Note:** This piece is known only from two newspaper clippings in a scrapbook in the Manx National Heritage Library, J48/60, “Music Hymns Carols Scrapbook,” 5–6 & 36–37. Both are annotated with the date of appearance, but they differ between 16 January 1897 (the former) and 6 June 1897 (the latter). The MNHL holding of the *Manx Sun* for 1897 lacks this issue (January is missing altogether, issues commence with the edition for 6 February 1897, see Microfilm N73), as does the British Newspaper Library at Collindale, London (issues commence 23 January 1897, see Microfilm M 2780). However, Rev. T. Talbot, “Mr Talbot on Our Review of ‘Manx National Songs,’ ‘Manx Ballads and Music,’” *Manx Sun* 30 January 1897: 5 cols c–d, confirms in his letter to the editor (col. c) that the review was published in the issue for 16 January 1897.



“The sakes! The sakes! What’s this article in the Manx Sun? I’ve never seen or heard of it.”¹ So wrote T.E. Brown to Deemster J.F. Gill on 22 January 1897. He added: “Unfavourable, I suppose.” Having read the above, one can see that it goes some way beyond that. Nevertheless, there is at one point a certain sly humour:

The compilers inform us [...] that a few old people retain the words and tunes of an ancient Manx music but that they are somewhat reluctant to sing the songs of their forefathers [...]. We devoutly wish the “old people” had effectually shown this reluctance when visited by the Messrs Gill [...].

¹ Letter from T.E. Brown to Deemster J.F. Gill, 22 January 1897, Manx National Heritage Library, MS 09702, Box 2, unlisted.

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The author of the review is unknown, and at this late date it is unlikely ever to be established just who wrote the piece. Brown’s own view on the character of the author was clear:

So I will say nothing more about it, except that it must have been an ill-conditioned wretch indeed who sullied the crown of a very legitimate triumph by what I take it for granted must have been a tissue of malicious rubbish.

But as will be seen in the next note in this series, a finger of suspicion was soon to be pointed at Canon John Quine, the vicar of Lonan parish, as the author of the piece.

STEPHEN MILLER
VIENNA, 2005

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